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IRAN/IRAQ

PAULEY: The war between Iran and Iraq is more than three years old now and seldom makes page one news anymore, but that could change, following Iran's threat to close the Straits of Hormuz, a narrow stretch of water forming a bottleneck at the outlet of the Persian Gulf. That would shut off the flow of oil from all of the gulf states. NBC Pentagon correspondent Jack Reynolds has a report.

REYNOLDS: The Iran-Iraq war has dragged on for over three years, cost an estimated quarter of a million lives and reduced parts of both countries to rubble. Now, the impending delivery to Iraq of five French-made Super Entendard fighters, with their Exocet missiles, could cause another crisis. The Iranians say that if these weapons are used against their oil facilities, they will close the gulf to all shipping. But many analysts say all this is, for the most part, rhetoric. The Iraqis have hit Iranian oil fields with rockets and bombs and already have Exocet missiles that can be fired at targets like these from helicopters. The Iranians don't have the naval capability for any sustained closing of the gulf; their mine-laying ability is limited and the U.S. Navy could quickly sweep the shipping lanes clear. The Navy could also blow up any ships the Iranians might sink to block gulf shipping lanes. But even one relatively small incident could cause insurance rates to soar and discourage shipping companies from sending their vulnerable vessels into the gulf. For Today, this is Jack Reynolds in Washington.

PAULEY: And Jack joins us now in Washington with former CIA Director Admiral Stansfield Turner, and good morning to both of you. Admiral, what about it? If they decided to close it, what do you think, could they? TURNER: I think the Iranians would have trouble closing the Straits of Hormuz, Jane. Their navy's not in good shape, their air force is not in good shape, the Straits are 20 miles wide at the narrowest, it's not a narrow water from a naval point of view. However, the Iranians could, very easily, go out and sink an individual ship or two. That would cause problems with scaring ships off, with driving insurance rates up. The Iranians, though, have a second option. They have the oil terminals, in these countries that produce oil, to try to attack. Almost all the countries in the Persian Gulf area have only one or two or three oil terminals. In the early stages of the war with Iraq, the Iranians destroyed the two Iraqi oil terminals, which are located here. What we're talking about the Iraqis doing now with the Entendard aircraft is attacking the Iranian oil terminal, principal one, which is located here. So, therefore, another retaliation would be for Iran to take its aircraft and attack the oil terminals in these countries. That could be a serious

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problem, because 25 percent of the free world's oil today flows out through these terminals.

REYNOLDS: Admiral, picking up on that, there are AWACS aircraft in Saudi Arabia. Would they be useful in that instance? TURNER: The AWACS aircraft are here primarily, Jack, to protect against that very threat. Now what they would do is orbit someplace like this and watch all the aircraft that might come out of Iran headed for these various terminals. We must remember, however, the AWACS is just like a big radar station, that's what this thing on the top of it is. All it does is warn you, then it's up to the fighter aircraft of these countries to go out and shoot down the attack. Whether that's teamwork that they've worked out well enough over the last three years that the AWACS have been there or not is awfully hard to say. I have some doubts as to whether that teamwork will work adequately.

REYNOLDS: Admiral, what can the United States do if one of these possible scenarios takes place? TURNER: Well, of course, we have some, part of the fleet, right off Oman over here, and I think it would be reasonably easy to escort shipping through here and generally protect it. But, again, not that first ship. Until you know they're really going to attack, they've got the opportunity to make the first shot and probably get a kill.

REYNOLDS: Would we ask for help in something like this from some of allies, for example? TURNER: Yes; unfortunately, both the British and French have reasonable naval contingents in the Indian Ocean and in the general area here. And I would certainly hope, because their interests are much at stake in this, they get their oil more than we do from this area, I hope they would join with us as we multi-lateralize this conflict.

REYNOLDS: Admiral, thank you very much. Jane?

PALMER: Iran is threatening to close the Straits of Hormuz to oil shipping if France is allowed to sell war planes to its enemy, Iraq. Earlier here on the Today program, Jack Reynolds discussed the possibility of another crisis in the Persian Gulf with former CIA Director Stansfield Turner.

REYNOLDS: Good morning, John. Admiral Turner looked beyond the current situation this morning to our long-range interests in the gulf and what could happen after the death of the Iranian leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. TURNER: Our primary interest in this whole situation is to keep these countries who have the major reserves of oil in the world friendly to us and sending that oil to us and our allies. At the same time, Jack, we want to be very careful that we don't antagonize Iran any more than we absolutely have to, to protect these countries. Iran, you have to remember, is a neighbor of the Soviet Union, of Russia. When Khomeini dies, the Russians may

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come in here with either political or a military influence.

REYNOLDS: The admiral also suggested that, in the event of a crisis in the gulf, we should enlist the help of our allies; the British and the French, for example, as well as some of the gulf states. John?

PALMER: Pentagon correspondent Jack Reynolds reporting live this morning.

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